

Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary

By. Daphne Land

At ten to noon Mary Scott was waiting by her front door with a plate of cookies. They were snickerdoodles, store-bought, though she'd never admit it. She smoothed out her apron and checked the clock. She had been told the judges would arrive at 12:00 pm, but Mr. Applegate was head of the judging panel and he was always a few minutes early.

At 11:54 pm there was a sharp rapping on the door. Mary delayed a couple of seconds to make it seem as if she hadn't been lying in wait, plastered on her most gracious smile, and opened the door. There were three people on her porch: Hiram Applegate, a boisterous man who had been with the American Vasculum Society for twenty-one years; Lily Reese, a photographer who thought much more than she talked; and Johnathan Creed, a newcomer to town who wrote for a very prestigious gardening magazine.

Mary shepherded her guests into her parlor and offered the snickerdoodles. Mr. Applegate took several, chatting all the while. "Miss Mary, delighted to see you, delighted! It's been far too long." He took a bite as he pondered exactly how long it had been. "Last year's seed swap, wasn't it?"

"I believe so," Mary said. She noticed Mr. Creed had declined any cookies. New judges were always so by the book. Mary straightened her shoulders and suggested they get down to business. Her garden would speak for itself.

The party moved to Mary's backyard. The judges readied their clipboards and set off down a cobblestone path. Things started off well. Mrs. Reese admired Mary's fringed bleeding hearts and even Mr. Creed cast an appreciative eye over her rose bushes. This was all well and good, but Mary knew it was just window dressing. She ached to get to the main event. The path in Mary's garden wound its way through the flowers and led to a copse of plum trees near the back of the yard. Scarlet cloth was hung between the trees, obscuring what lay beyond. Mary took the lead when the group reached the trees, making ready to remove the cloth hanging over the path.

"Lady and Gents, I present to you the pièce de résistance. Vasculum populus, more commonly known as pod people." She yanked away the fabric to reveal a row of strange plants. They were no less than eight feet tall; their sturdy stalks curved at the top and attached to large pods. The pods were dark green, with thick, bumpy skin that bunched up in the middle. At the plants' bases were broad, rosy leaves and offshoots that were reminiscent of Venus flytraps, though they were six times larger. The mouths of the flytraps were trussed shut.

The judges clustered around the leftmost plant, examining every inch and taking notes. "Vivid coloring, firm stalk, sensitive nasal pores..." Mr. Creed mumbled as he stroked a flytrap. It twitched and convulsed, unable to bite with red twine around its mouth.

"How do you do it, Miss Mary, how do you do it?" Mr. Applegate asked as he compared the pod with a color wheel on his clipboard.

Mary giggled. "Love and dedication, I suppose," she said, then added "These are grown from a shipment direct from New World."

Mr. Applegate whistled. "That must have cost a pretty penny."

After a couple of minutes Mr. Applegate waved his companions away from the plant. "That's enough of the exterior. Miss Mary, if I may do the honors...?"

"Of course," she replied, and grabbed a pair of gardening shears out of her apron pocket. She handed them to Mr. Applegate, who knelt at the base of the plant and pressed the tip of the shears to the bottom of the pod, where the skin bunched. Mary held her breath. She had done everything she could, did all the right things at all the right times, but you never really knew how they were going to turn out until you opened them.

Mr. Applegate drew the shears up the middle of the pod. There was a sinewy, snapping sound as the pod split, releasing a tidal wave of goo. Mr. Applegate stepped back quickly, but even with twenty-one years of practice he couldn't avoid messing up his trousers. He gave a loud "Harumph!" and reached inside the plant.

When he drew back, there was another hand cupped in his. It was followed by an arm, then a whole body. The pod person stumbled into the light and stood there blinking. She was tall and lithe, with wavy black hair, pale skin, and a muscled build. Her eyes were dark blue like the sea – they darted back and forth, taking in everything and nothing. The judges rushed forward again to look her over. Her jaw flapped wordlessly as they poked and prodded her.

After thoroughly examining the maid, the judges left her to Mary's care as they repeated the process with the rest of the plants. Soon there were six naked women standing in the garden, slimy and shivering. Mary ran back to the house and grabbed a laundry basket full of dresses she had bought at Goodwill.

Mary couldn't have been more pleased. This was the best crop she'd had in years. Not an ugly one in the bunch – indeed, it was Mary's opinion that one or two had the look of an actor about them. Hollywood was always looking for a fresh face. She set aside considering potential buyers long enough to escort the judges to the door. As they left, Mr. Applegate turned to her with a smile and a wink, and said "You didn't hear it from me, Miss Mary, but I see a blue ribbon in your future."

Mary smiled and thanked him before returning to her beloved plants. The day was far from over, and there was much to be done.